

# SET 'EM UP

## Keeping up quality potential in stockers.

by Micah Mensing, Certified Angus Beef LLC

The cattle in your receiving pen have more genetic potential today than ever before. That's according to Justin Sexten, director of supply development for the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand, pointing out five years of improving quality grades while speaking at the 2018 Kansas State University Beef Stocker Field Day this fall.

"Genetics, nutrition, health, technology and management — those are the five big buckets that affect quality," he said. Stocker operators can't influence genetics, but a focus on the other four buckets will make a difference.

Nutrition includes ingredients and timing of supplements. With better growth implants and genetics, there are more opportunities to challenge the status quo, Sexten said. However, implant duration and dose need to match nutrition.

Forages make up most of a stocker calf's diet, but often there's not enough nutritional value to boost quality grade.

"Data on creep-fed calves suggest starch enhances marbling development," Sexten said, but varying starch levels in stocker supplements made little difference

in research trials. Until those calves grow to the 800-pound area, marbling cells are not much affected.

"When calves reach 64% of their mature weight, switching them to a supplement to support marbling development would be beneficial to the quality grade," he said.

The take-home on supplement programs? Assess genetic potential as well as the animal's location on its growth curve, then provide adequate nutrition to support marbling deposition for that stage.

"Marbling score follows the same pattern as average daily gain (ADG)," Sexten said. "It increases slightly as nutrition improves." Small improvements in nutrition don't seem to significantly improve quality grade, but that merits a closer look.

"You may be curious as to the

impact on your customers' closeouts, and 40 units of marbling may not sound like much," he said, "but just 25 more units added to a pen of cattle provides the opportunity for 14% more to reach premium Choice. That's \$4-\$6 per head more for the pen in carcass premium alone."

The other side of the coin is 34% of cattle that achieve premium Choice do so by no more than 40 units of marbling, he noted (see Fig. 1). "If \$4 to \$6 per head isn't worth your effort, consider the downward risk of losing the extra premiums on 34% of cattle in the pen."

### Implants and ionophores

Using growth implants during the stocker phase vs. delaying till feedyard entry increases ADG by 0.3 pounds, Sexten said.

"Implants are a solid investment in the stocker enterprise," he said, with gain improvements worth

more than the minimal quality-grade depression. That's providing the implant potency and payout period matches the stocker period nutrition and length.

Health is one of the greatest challenges stockers face; but beef

consumers are taking a closer look, too.

"Between consumers and chefs, few will argue the need to treat sick animals with antibiotics," Sexten said. "When I discuss feed-grade antibiotics, I explain there's a product that modifies the

rumen microbial population."

Ionophores are antibiotics that have no use in human medicine, but help cattle reach final weight more efficiently.

"Suddenly, the consumer has to choose," he said. "Do I hate antibiotics, or do I care about reducing environmental impact?"

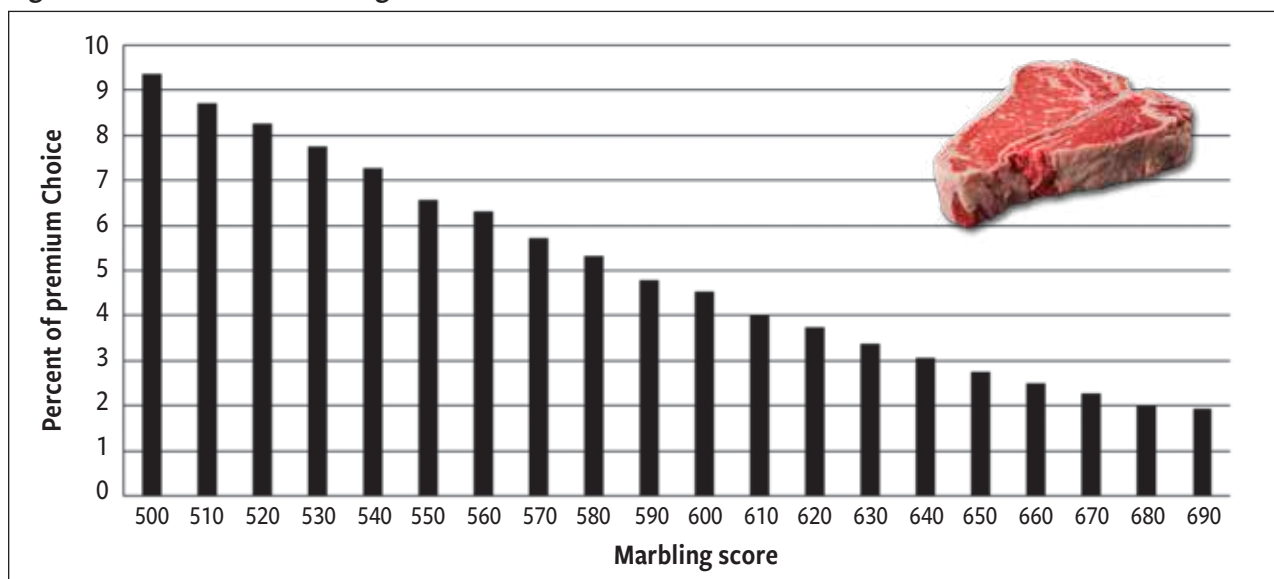
Stocker operators consider many factors in managing health, Sexten said, "but what you may not consider is 4% of losses within the beef supply chain can be attributed to reduction in quality grade for the next person owning those calves."

That percentage can be improved with greater focus on prevention, minimizing stress and optimizing nutrition, he said. A proper balance of nutrition, technology, management and attention to health will foster that upward trend in beef quality grade. ■



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Fig. 1: Premium Choice marbling distribution



SOURCE: 2017 National Beef Quality Audit.

Editor's note: Micah Mensing is a producer communications intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.